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The collapse of history: reconstructing Old Testament theology

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Book Reviews

The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology

Overtures to Biblical Theology series

Leo G. Perdue

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994

xvi + 317 pp. \$24.75

Leo G. Perdue is presently dean and professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX. He has authored several monographs and commentaries on the Old Testament, particularly in the area of wisdom studies. In this volume Perdue shares how OT theology presently is moving in new and imaginative directions.

Perdue's book is a most helpful summary and critique of the old and new in OT theologizing. Through a reading of this book the reader should gain a clear sense of how and why former ways of doing OT theology have come to a close. OT theologizing until recently has been dominated profoundly by history in the historical-critical quest for text, source, form, tradition development, and ancient Near Eastern setting. Such historical preoccupation, Perdue claims, has simply collapsed under the weight of its own false, self-interested objectivism.

The book is subdivided into four major parts. The first outlines the continuum of history as supplying the form, content, and methodology for doing OT theology in the past. Here Perdue deals with the approaches of the American school (W.F. Albright, G.E. Wright, G. Mendenhall, F.M. Cross, Jr., D.N. Freedman, J. Bright), the German school (A. Alt, M. Noth, G. von Rad), and the social-scientific liberation school (N. Gottwald). The next two parts undertake to detail and critique current movements away from history to the importance and place of creation and myth (J. Levenson, C. Westermann, R. Knierim, H. Schmidt, J. Crenshaw, L. Perdue), from history to canonical text and its implied audience (B.S. Childs), and from history to metaphor (S. McFague, P. Tribble).

In my view, the climax of Perdue's monograph comes in the fourth and last part. Here Perdue shows how recent OT theologizing has also moved away from history to narrative (H. Frei, R. Alter) and from history to imagination (W. Brueggemann). Perdue suggests that there is much

common ground in creative imagination going on between narrative history and narrative fiction and between historical memory and contemporary envisioning than one initially suspects. As an added bonus and addendum to all the foregoing, Perdue closes out each chapter by illustrating how such shifts play out in the Book of Jeremiah. In short, this is a promising book for catching up on recent study and reflection in OT theology.

Perdue finishes up his book with a proposal for doing OT theology in the future. He makes it clear that by his reference to the collapse of history he does not mean to suggest that history or historical method is no longer significant for OT scholarship. Rather his purpose has been to document the growing revolt against the domination of history on behalf of the potential of non-historical epistemologies. Perdue holds that both the descriptive and the constructive task must continue, but in imaginative dialogue and interchange with both past and present.

Only the harsh critique of time, I would suggest, will reveal whether such new OT theologizing will work to the interest of the OT, and not go on to become too distant, too subjective, and too imaginative, with the sad result that contemporary interests, not history, may end up dominating the text.

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Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy

Walter Brueggemann
Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997
xxi + 777 pp. \$69.75 Hardcover

Commencing with winter semester 1998, the OT theology class at LTS was privileged to begin use of this book as its main textbook. Student response to the book has been most positive. One student quipped: "If you know of any other OT books like this one, I want to read them!" The Senior class agreed in its discussion of the book, that although excessive in length, it was challenging, informative, easy to read and comprehend.

Brueggemann's book is an OT theology generated out of imaginative interaction with the text of the Hebrew Bible. Its overall approach is post-modern. Thus Brueggemann allows only the OT text to speak, not anything outside, under, or behind the text. What the text or Israel speaks is what is, not what we or others think really happened or should have happened. Brueggemann refuses to let objective positivism or anything else dictate what is possible or impossible. What is more, Brueggemann lets the text speak for itself in all of its fullness, plurality, and diversity.